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Theological Anthropology in the Restoration Movement

Past and Present

BY RON HIGHFIELD

Theological anthropology has never been the subject of serious, sustained, or systematic reflection among Churches of Christ. We have worked on this topic only as it relates to other issues more central to our identity, such as baptism, church order, and, of late, hermeneutics. On theological topics such as anthropology, where we have not staked our identity, there has been great diversity and even a kind of recklessness.

The Past

So any statement of the doctrine of humanity that could claim to represent Churches of Christ would need to be very general indeed. And yet I think we can venture such a statement. We have understood human beings to be God's creatures, made in God's image, male and female, owing worship and obedience to him. Human beings are sinful and in need of God's saving act of atonement made in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, humans have great dignity, rationality, and freedom. God offers humanity salvation, which it can receive through belief and obedience to God's commands or reject by refusing to believe and obey. Humanity is composed of body, soul, and spirit. Saved humanity's destiny is the resurrection of the body to eternal and blessed life with God.

This view of humanity has remained in the background, implicit and, for the most part, uncontested in the church. Early preachers and writers were granted great latitude in interpreting the scriptural teaching about humanity. It seems that there were two rules in such discussions: (1) teachings must always be based on the scriptures, and (2) conclusions must never sound Calvinist or Roman Catholic.

Our theological anthropology was shaped definitively by the early Restoration movement leaders' rejection of Calvinism as inconsistent with the scriptures and with life in the enlightened and optimistic American republic. Theological anthropology was a disputed issue in the Reformation era. The Reformers, Luther and Calvin, reasserted strong forms of the Augustinian doctrines of original sin and the bondage of the will in order to counter Roman Catholic synergism, the belief that humans could work with God to merit salvation. After a false start by Erasmus and his party, Roman Catholics themselves sharpened and purified their anthropology in the Fifth Session of the Council of Trent (June 17, 1545).

Alexander Campbell

In the early days of the American republic, evangelical Protestants fell all over themselves to distance

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themselves from orthodox Calvinism. Stone, Campbell, and other reformers shared in this revolution. In the Campbell-Rice debate, Alexander Campbell had occasion to reflect on his childhood struggle with, and rejection of, the “Calvinist” doctrine of the damnation of non-elect infants who die in infancy.¹ According to the mature Campbell of *The Christian System*, all infants are of the elect.² Campbell rejected the Augustinian-Calvinist view of original sin and election. Calvinism, according to Campbell, is “crazy at this point.”³

Campbell’s rejection of the Calvinist doctrines of original sin and of election and reprobation will not be surprising to those familiar with the later course of the Restoration movement. What is surprising, however, is the amount of “Calvinism” Campbell retained. While he rejected inherited guilt, he advocated an inherited “depravity,” which he also called “the sin of our nature.” In *The Christian System*, he reasoned: “True, indeed, it is; our nature was corrupted by the fall of Adam before it was transmitted to us; and hence that hereditary imbecility to do good, and that proneness to do evil, so universally apparent in all human beings.”⁴ “Adam,” Campbell asserted, “was not only the common father, but the actual representative of all his children.”⁵ He instructed his readers: “[Y]ou did not personally sin in that act; but your nature, then in the person of your father, sinned against the Author of your existence.”⁶ We did not inherit Adam’s sin, Campbell argued, but “a disease in the moral constitution of man is as clearly transmissible as any physical taint.”⁷ Consequently, Campbell considered our present existence to be a fallen and distorted form of our created nature. In the *Campbell-Rice Debate*, he maintained: “Adam was a natural man; we, as his mere

offspring, are preternatural men, and under Christ we hope to rise to be supernatural men.”⁸

Now, if you still doubt my point that Campbell retained much of the Calvinist perspective on anthropology, allow me to show you how seriously Campbell took the notion of an inherited, depraved nature. Again in the *Campbell-Rice Debate*, Campbell addressed the salvation of infants. He did not argue, as we might expect, that infants are sinless and have no need of Christ’s atonement. Campbell claimed, rather, that

the atonement of the Messiah has made it compatible with God, with the honor of his throne and government, to save all those infants who die in Adam. He has made an ample provision for extending salvation from all the consequences of Adam’s sin to whomsoever he will. Infants then need the same kind of regeneration that Paul, and Peter, and James, and John, and all the saints need—the entire destruction of this body of sin and death.⁹

In a tract consisting of questions and answers published in 1849, Alexander Campbell asked and answered two questions that fit our discussion:

(1) In what point of view are we to consider infants? Answer: As inheriting an evil nature—“conceived in sin”—“brought forth in iniquity”—“prone to evil”—guilty and subject to death, “the wages of sin.” Ps 58:3, 51:5, Job 14:4; John 3:6; Eph 2:3. (2) Can any of them be saved before they are capable of receiving instruction? Answer: Yes; by the merits and atonement of Christ.¹⁰

Finally, in a reflection on the pathos of the fall, Campbell lamented:

Man has strayed away from God and nature, and has become a preternatural being. From this miserable condition God proposes, in his glorious philanthropy, to redeem man and to make him supernatural through Christ. . . . But now his soul is harassed with the tumult of a thousand passions, lusts, appetites, and elements that war against his soul. If there were no sin in human nature, there could be none in obeying all its passions.”¹¹

Robert Milligan

Continuing this tradition, the second generation Restoration leader, Robert Milligan, argued that Adam incurred the penalty of spiritual, as well as physical, death. We are, according to Milligan, “diseased in our spiritual as well as in our physical constitution.”¹² Milligan warned against the extremes of Augustinianism on the one hand, which detracts too much from the powers of man, and Pelagianism on the other hand, which “too highly exalts and elevates them.”¹³ In a footnote, he listed the third heretical tenet of Pelagianism as

that the fall of Adam had no influence whatever on either the souls or the bodies of his posterity, but that every man when born into the world is just what Adam was when he was created—his body is mortal *per se*, and his soul is wholly without character.¹⁴

David Walk

But there was also another early view, one that sounds much more like what I was taught. David Walk was baptized by Benjamin Franklin in 1862. In a sermon titled “Death and Life,” he expounded Rom 7:2.¹⁵ In this sermon he had occasion to reflect on the fall of Adam and its consequences for humanity. Walk admitted that because Adam sinned, we inherit a mortal body. “The certainty of physical death to all his descendants,” Walk claimed, “is the one necessary consequence of Adam’s transgression.”¹⁶ But “as for the rest,” Walk observed, “Adam could sin, and we can sin; nor can I see any difference between his condition and ours.”¹⁷ Opposing what he called the “apostolic hypothesis” to the “orthodox hypothesis,” he argued that “till man sins, he is just such a being, morally, as Adam was before he sinned.”¹⁸

Early and Mid-Twentieth Century

Theological anthropology in twentieth-century Churches of Christ resembles the thought of David Walk more than that of Alexander Campbell. I was taught that humans are born pure and sinless, with human nature and the image of God intact. Infants that die in infancy go to heaven because they have no sin and not because Christ died for them and was

raised again. A child can sin, and therefore need baptism, only after it reaches the age of moral accountability. I was taught further that our sin is the sum total of our unlawful acts and not a quality of our nature or moral character, as Campbell argues.

Now, Walk’s view of sin coheres well with the belief in the power of human rationality that is implicit in our traditional hermeneutic. If we decide to be honest, we can be objective, find the facts, and all understand the Bible alike. This is true, not just of a minimum number of essentials, as in Campbell, but of an elaborate array of doctrines.

Another component of our traditional theological anthropology is our understanding of the immortality of the soul. Instead of placing our hope in the biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body, guaranteed reliable by the resurrection of Christ, we have traditionally accepted the Greek view of the immortality of an immaterial soul. This view reinforces the notion that infants who die in infancy need none of the benefits of the atonement. The immaterial “soul” of the infant cannot die, and it has not sinned, so what need is there for Christ’s work? But if the resurrection of the body is a necessary part of salvation, then Christ’s death and resurrection are necessary for the salvation of infants, as well as all others.

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The Present

Recent trends indicate that, by default, much of our understanding of humanity today comes from psychology and the social sciences. Subtly, a non-Christian view of humanity, which underlies many theories and therapies, creeps into theology and

preaching. Influenced by Abraham Maslow's theory of humanity as a hierarchy of needs, we preach to people's "needs," reinforcing their narcissism. We listen to an existential psychology that understands the human as a self-actualizing or self-creating being. We use developmental theory that understands certain problem behaviors as normal and excusable at certain stages. Lack of self-esteem takes center stage as the human problem. Feelings and impulses, such as anger and lust, are declared to be neither good nor bad; they just are.

Future Directions

Humanity is God's creation.

We need to explore the implications of the biblical teaching that human beings are God's creatures, created for his purposes and not ours. We cannot create ourselves; rather, we depend on God absolutely. We have no rights against God, and we owe him complete obedience.

Enlightenment thought, postmodern thought, and contemporary popular culture reject scornfully this understanding of humanity. Indeed, they exist because of their rebellion against this view. But that is all the more reason we need to explore the biblical view and criticize these alternatives.

We need to come to terms with the subversive effects of the Greek view of the immortality of the soul. It tends to inflate our sense of self-importance and independence from God. Viewing the human soul as naturally immortal gave comfort to classical liberal theology, which rejected supernaturalism. Liberalism thought it could jettison both Christ's resurrection and ours without losing the hope of life after death or the essentials of the Christian faith.

The biblical doctrine of the composite but essential unity of humanity, to the contrary, calls us to a humble trust in the grace of God to save us from the nothingness of death through the resurrection of the body. This doctrine also affirms the essential supernatural nature of the Christian faith and hope. Apart from a supernatural resurrection, both Christ's and ours, there is no hope.

Human beings are sinners.

Our weak doctrine of sin lies at the root of many problems in our understanding of the faith. Superficiality in the doctrine of sin spawns trivialized doctrines of the atonement, of sanctification, of the Holy Spirit, of the church, and of eschatology. We need to engage in some serious reflection on the depth and extent of human sin. Sin is fundamentally the refusal to honor God as God and to accept our place as God's creatures. Karl Barth sees sin as making its appearance in three forms: pride, sloth, and falsehood. In our pride we wish to be as God, and we usurp the prerogatives of God. In our sloth we refuse to rise to the high calling of God to be his obedient servants. In our falsehood we cover over our pride and sloth with a web of lies believed even by ourselves.

Campbell was right: humanity lives from birth to death under the pall of sin. The so-called "age of accountability" works better as a legal concept than a theological one. True, there is a difference between the temper fit of a two-year-old and the rebellion of a teenager, but it's a matter of degree and not of kind. Both act out of the same fallen nature that must die and be resurrected before it can be saved.

We never cease to be sinners in this life. Luther was right: Christians are sinful and justified at the same time. Nothing truly good can come from our fallen nature. Truly good works honor God as God and glory in being God's servant. Only in the power of the Holy Spirit are such good works possible.

Christ is the True Human; Christ is model and destiny.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the true "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), the "first-born among many brothers" (Rom 8:29), the pioneer who blazed the trail for us (Heb 12:2). If we want to see true humanity, we must look at him. We see in his obedience to the Father and service to humanity the essence of humanity. We see in his glorious resurrection our destiny as children of God. We cannot find true humanity in psychoanalysis, behavioral studies of animals, sociology, or a political theory. We need to look more intently at God to learn about ourselves.

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Notes

¹ Alexander Campbell, *Campbell-Rice Debate on Christian Baptism* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1917), 619.

² Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Cincinnati: Standard, n.d.), 19. Since all infants are of the elect, it would seem that all adults are of the elect. But Campbell does not believe this, for election is in Christ. Campbell must then use the term elect in a special sense when he speaks of infants.

³ Campbell, *Campbell-Rice Debate*, 619.

⁴ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ Campbell, *Campbell-Rice Debate*, 709.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 655.

¹⁰ Oram Jackson Swiney, *Restoration Readings* (Old Paths Book Club, 1945), 100.

¹¹ Campbell, *Campbell-Rice Debate*, 710.

¹² Robert Milligan, *Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption* (Cincinnati: R. W. Carroll, 1869), 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ David Walk, "Death and Life," in *The Living Pulpit of the Christian Church*, ed. W. T. Moore (St. Louis: Christian Publishing), 413–28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

(Continued "Robert Milligan")

restmov/people/rmilligan.html.

McGarvey, J. W. "Robert Milligan." In *Epistle to the Hebrews*, by Robert Milligan, 389–96. St. Louis: Christian Publishing, 1876.

Notes

¹ Robert Milligan, *An Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption, As It Is Revealed and Taught in the Holy Scriptures* (Cincinnati: R. W. Carroll, 1869).

² Robert Milligan, *Reason and Revelation: or, The Province of Reason in Matters Pertaining to Divine Revelation Defined and Illustrated; and the Paramount Authority of the Holy Scriptures Vindicated* (Cincinnati: R. W. Carroll, 1868).

³ Robert Milligan, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary, vol. 9 (St. Louis: Christian Publishing, 1876).

⁴ Milligan, *Reason and Revelation*, xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 37–39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41–53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 366–68.

⁹ Milligan, *Scheme of Redemption*, xii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50–61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 535.